Double Bridges to Justice: Founder's Reflection on Spiritual Basis of International Bridges to Justice [1]

There are those times in your life when you feel like you have nowhere else to go but to seek the wisdom of Almighty God, whether you believe in one or not. One of those times occurred for me in 1996 in Cambodia, as I prepared to confront police officers about their routine practice of the torture of prisoners. I was working for the United Nations as a 'judicial mentor' training judges, prosecutors and police officers in Kandal province. They had armed me with the new "Cambodian Laws" with which to convince Cambodian police officers to discontinue their recently outlawed practice of torture. I wasn't sure what to do; in fact, I had no idea at all. But at least I knew that simply telling them that it was against the law was not going to work either. Not knowing what to do, I went to the only place I knew to go – the Ocean. And there I talked to the God that I wasn't even sure existed and asked how I was supposed to do this thing that seemed impossible to figure out.

That night I got my answer; the ideal of justice requires bridging the gap between one's inner life and values, and one's work in the outer world. And in the next few days, I designed a workshop that started with basic questions that connected them to some of their values and hopes for the future. I started by asking the police why they had decided to become police officers in the first place. Most of them said that they became police officers because they wanted democracy. They pointed to the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge and talked about how they didn't want to ever go back to a period like that again. Yet, they also said that they were vehemently against the new laws, which stated that there was a 'presumption' of innocence for prisoners who had not yet received a fair trial. They also stated that they felt that torture was the only way to get prisoners to 'tell the truth' and confess to the crime that they had just committed. I introduced the notion that these confessions were perhaps weren't very reliable, but many insisted that tortured confessions were reliable. We would role play and the police would play the role of prisoners beaten for an answer. Many insisted that if they were innocent, they would not give a false confession even if they were beaten in the process.

1. The ideal of justice requires two bridges. The first is a personal bridge, the connection between one's inner life and values and one's work in the outer world. The second bridge is between communities of conscience in the developed world partnering with legal aid in developing nations. Thus, no project whose objective is true justice can succeed without building both the personal and the communal bridges.

But then I brought in a picture of the posted rules of the former Khmer Rouge Toul Sleng torture center. The posted rules, which underscored the presumption of innocence stated: “Don't you dare try and tell a lie or you will be given more lashes.” The officers began to consider all those thousands of people, including their relatives, who gave confessions under duress and torture. “This, the old system, is a system where presumption of guilt is operating,” I said. “Do you really agree with this system?” And then many of the officers began to talk amongst themselves about these new laws. They began to look again at their values and beliefs. They spoke about how they wanted to move forward from their past and not move backwards. But were their actions consistent with their professed values, hopes and beliefs? Over some time, many began to reconsider whether the “old” way of doing things was really the right way. And because of their reflection, many decided that they wanted to change and did.

I conducted workshops with hundreds of police officers, and there was some initial resistance. On one particular night, the provincial district chief of police asked that my assistant and I join him for dinner by the river. I felt unsafe during the dinner, and for good reason as he persisted in veiled threats throughout the night. He told me that my trainings were “shit” and that I should stop them immediately. After questioning why I acted so tough “just like a man,” and hinting at my alleged sexual preferences, he spoke directly in front of me to my assistant in Khmer, knowing that I understood every word that he said. He stated that although I was a foreigner, I didn't look high class enough to even be Chinese, and that if it came down to it, and there was a problem (i.e. I persisted I my trainings) he would deal with me as a Khmer and only afford me the same rights of a Khmer, not a protected foreigner.

I was uneasy that night thinking of what he said, and reflecting back on other recent conversations and events. A judge who cared for me got off the bench in the middle of a trial one day and came to my office and urged me: “Don't go on these investigations. You don't have to, it isn't your job. And if you go, I can't say when, maybe not today or tomorrow, maybe next week, I don't know when, but something bad might happen to you.” Though I insisted on going, my driver refused to drive me. I didn’t go.

I recalled my meetings with the prison directors in Kandal, who initially would not let me into the prisons. They had told me that I needed to be careful in the prison, since they had overheard the prisoners discussing a plan to “cut you up into little pieces and put you in a sack, and take you out so they can eat you piece by piece.” They warned me, “You better be careful if you keep coming to this prison.”

That night, after these occurrences, I suddenly became uneasy. In fact, I became very upset and visibly shaken with these veiled threats to my safety, but also to my work. Again, I really wasn't sure what to do... I had spoken to my boss at the UN before and he had said, "Don't worry, they aren't going to hurt people like us". But I knew that he meant foreign UN workers. Foreign UN workers are rarely targeted; it is the Cambodian UN workers who get hurt. I knew he considered me one of the foreigners, but I was one of the foreigners who spoke Khmer -- and who everyone insisted looked Khmer as well. None of this relieved my unease in the slightest. I found myself not knowing where to turn.

Unexpectedly, I encountered the most profound advice I had yet received regarding my human rights work from a most unlikely source: my spiritual guides. I went to my Buddhist meditation teacher, and I remember standing on the roof and talking to him. “I don't know what to do,” I said. His words were simple: “remember that whatever you focus on will grow.” I also sought advice from Sister Rose, an Indian nun from Mother Teresa's order. She ran the Missionaries of Charity orphanage that I volunteered at in my spare time. I asked her a similar question, “What should I do?” After a moment of thought, her answer, too, was simple: “You must seek to find the Christ in each person, or you must seek to find the Buddha in each person. Then you must work with that Christ or Buddha.” Like my meditation teacher, she believed in the power of transformative love.

I took their wisdom to heart, and sought to work with the Christ and Buddha in each person. During my time there, I saw phenomenal changes in the human rights terrain and was eventually warmly welcomed by the police officials who had initially been reticent. The first public defender offices were established, the first motion to suppress a tortured confession was granted, and the first arraignment court in the country was birthed. When I left, the prison director, who

had already implemented an exercise program and vegetable garden in the prison, asked what they could do to express our friendship. I suggested that they allow me to hold a celebration in the prison for the prisoners, to reclaim their humanity. And on my last day, they let out 120 prisoners, 30 at a time, and together with the prison guards (some with armed AKA 47's) we sang songs, ate chicken curry, and had a lion dance. I saw the prison guards and police beyond their uniforms and embraced their humanity, and they in turn were willing to see the prisoners beyond their uniforms and embrace them in their humanity.

Neither Sister Rose nor my Buddhist meditation teacher considered themselves “human rights activists.” Nor were they lawyers or U.N. officials. Yet the advice they gave to me transformed my relationships and ultimately my work. Most major shifts and successful social movements do not occur simply because someone intellectually figured out “what to do.” Moses had to go to the desert before he figured out what he needed to do and how to do it. Spirituality was at the base of his call, as it was with the work of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and countless others. Spirituality not only sustained their movements, but qualitatively affected the approach of their work.

As human rights activists today, we too need to penetrate below legalistic “rights” discussions and “go to the desert” to discover what it means to draw upon the vast well of our spiritual resources and wisdom in our approach to human rights work. Without it, we become disconnected from our work and our values. We may espouse one set of values and yet act in an inconsistent way. We work for human rights and yet we limit ourselves in the breadth and possibility of our work when we refuse to see the “other” as one who is connected to us and shares in our humanity. Without a holistic approach and understanding of our work, without the necessary retreat, which allows us to make these connections between our work and our values, we easily become burned out, feel hopeless and are unable to see the fruit of our labor. By not explicitly recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings and the roots of shared cross-cultural spirituality, we rob ourselves of an important and invaluable human rights resource for mutual understanding in cross-cultural negotiations and working together.

IBJ’s work must adhere to and incorporate principles of transformative justice and values based leadership. Our accomplishments must stem from love, the recognition of the interconnectedness of all beings and the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. The simple advice of Sister Rose, the call to see the Christ/Buddha in each person, has profound implications to the approach of our work. The recognition of our shared humanity allows us to see and create possibilities that we might have been blinded to before. From this understanding, we are able to approach our work not from any sense of superiority or from an attitude which artificially separates communities into “us” and “them” categories. The spirituality which recognizes the humanity of the “other” also recognizes our own humanity and our own capacity for growth and mistakes. It recognizes the recent developments of nascent legal systems. The recognition of our communal human potential for change and transformation is grounded in our own humble recognition of our own US-based human rights journey as well. We have much to learn from each other and we must embrace the truth that we have something to share from our own journeys.

Despite the fact that it was against the law, Cambodian police officers displayed a gap between their espoused “democratic” values for the new Cambodia and the reality of their behavior when using torture as a means to obtaining confessions. Making values explicit and facilitating the process of allowing others to reconnect to their original vision or underlying values can have a tremendous affect in our human rights work when we all begin to bridge the gaps. Solidifying and clarifying our values makes our commitments more concrete. Our leadership should help others examine and address the gap between their espoused values and the reality of their actions and situation. We need to go to “the root” with others, and our approach to the work has to reflect this. But we also need to go to the base of the root ourselves, to continually renew the connection between our outer work and our inner lives. As we identify and more closely examine the values of others and ourselves, we may be led to alternative personal approaches to human rights or alternative public policy measures.

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